

EVENTYR

12 TALES OF
UNBREAKABLE FRIENDSHIP

Andrew O'Connell

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Eventyr: 12 Tales of Unbreakable Friendship

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The Old Man and the Marionette

Larry could have done with a new head of hair. The long, white wisps that remained on either side of his head were endearing to some, but they were rather unsightly. Serge was more or less bald. They both needed new suits. The brown, threadbare ones they wore wouldn't keep them warm for many winters more. They needed new shoes as well. Larry's, once shiny, bright and red, were worn out from dancing, and as for Serge's – well, life as a travelling bard had taken its toll.

The duo known as 'Larry and Serge' usually performed for food and lodging. It was a fairly comfortable life except when they were between gigs, on the road, at the mercy of the elements. They were well-received in the towns and smaller villages. The locals enjoyed hearing stories about their past, which Serge told humorously, and there was always much mirth when Larry, adjusting his lime-green bowtie, which had white polka dots on it, encouraged a band to strike up a tune so he could dance. Larry would jump for joy when a coin was thrown onto the stage, which would set the crowd laughing, creating a distraction during which Serge would swoop on the coin and pocket it. A few such coins sometimes were enough for Larry and Serge to treat themselves to a bus ride to the next stop, but there

was never enough money to buy new clothes, or a new pair of shoes.

* * *

They were sitting in the greenroom of the Hemingway Bar in Tirana, Serge's hometown, where they had just finished the last of the five shows they had been contracted to perform. They had almost finished their dinner when the owner of the bar, a short, surly man who wore a lot of gold rings on his fingers, drew back the curtain that separated the greenroom from the stage.

'A gentleman wants to see you,' the owner said, rubbing his hands together.

'A gentleman?' replied Serge, mesmerised by the owner's hands, trying to find a finger that did not have a gold ring on it.

'Wants to see you,' said the owner.

'What about?'

Moments later the curtain was flung back to reveal a tall, dark, well-suited, moustachioed man with a perfectly straight nose and eyes that sparkled like crystals in a dark cave.

'Serge!' the man said, opening his arms wide.

'Hello!' Serge replied enthusiastically, not unwillingly seduced by the man's effusiveness.

'You know who I am?'

'Er ...'

'It's good to meet you!' The man took Serge's right hand in both of his and shook it vigorously. 'You know me?'

'Er ...'

'Ha, haha! Serge, you are a national treasure – you and Larry, Larry and Serge, very funny, very enjoyable! I like watching you! Oh, Larry is so funny when he's dancing!'

'Yes.'

'Many people have come tonight!'

'Yes.'

'To see you!'

'Yes ...'

'Do you know how many?'

'One-hundred?'

'One-hundred-and-fifty!'

'I don't think we've ever performed to so many people.
Have we, Larry?'

The well-dressed man put his arm around Serge's and brought his voice down to a whisper. 'How much do they pay you?'

'Well ...'

'Not much.'

'They give us room and board.'

'Not much ... how is your dinner?'

'It's alright ... the steak's a bit tough.'

'Yes ...'

'It needs a bit of salt.'

'Yes ... Serge, come and work for me. I can help you.'

'Help me?'

'I can make you comfortable.'

'Comfortable?'

'Very comfortable.'

'Yes, well, er ...'

'You need a new pair of shoes, yes?'

'Yes.'

'I can help you.'

'Yes?'

'You need new clothes, yes?'

'Yes.'

'What will you do with all the money?'



'Money?'

'All the money you will make when you come and work for me.'

'Well ...'

'What will you buy?'

'I suppose I'd buy myself a new pair of shoes.'

'Haha! You can buy seven pairs of shoes with the money you'll make – one for each day of the week!'

'Oh ...'

'I have a contract.'

'A contract?'

'Yes.'

'I can't read.'

'I will explain it to you.'

'My father was a bard ...'

'You will work for me –'

'And his father before him, and *his* father.'

'Yes.'

'We're a family of storytellers.'

'Yes, yes. You come and work for me. I'll improve your act, and we'll increase the price for tickets. You will take ten per cent of what we earn.'

'Ten per cent?'

'Hahaha! You drive a hard bargain, Serge! Twenty per cent – but no more.'

'Well ...'

'You will need a new marionette.'

'Er ...'

'Poor old Larry – look at him Serge, he's getting old.'

'Larry's been with me a long time.'

'Time for a rest, eh?'

'Thirty years ...'

'That's wonderful, Serge –'

'He's well-liked -'

'Life goes on. Times change, people change.'

'He's losing his hair a bit but he still performs well.'

'Look at your jacket, Serge. Look at mine. Do you think I can wear this after thirty years?'

'Well ...'

'It's impossible. After thirty years, everything is different - I'm different, the world is different. You need to change with the times.' The man reached inside his jacket. 'Here is a pen. Are you happy?'

'Happy?'

'Here is the contract. Sign here and you will be very happy. Very rich.'

'I've never had much money.'

'New shoes, new clothes - everything new!'

'I *would* like a new pair of shoes, and a new coat would be nice - this one lets the sunlight through!'

'Of course! Sign here.'

'What about Larry?'

'He'll be ok.'

'Can he come with me? He'd be terribly lonely without me.'

'It's time to make more money now, Serge. Sign here. We'll get you a new marionette ... Larry can support you.'

'On stage?'

'Off stage, sorry.'

'Well -'

'Do you want a new life?'

'I think so.'

'Do you want new shoes, a new coat?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Just sign here. Everything will be ok.'

Serge signed.

'What do I do now?'

'I will come for you in the morning. Have your suitcase packed and ready to go. Your new life, Serge!' The man shook Serge's hand and left.

'Did you hear that, Larry? We're going to be rich!' Larry had an angry look on his face. 'Larry, what's wrong?' Serge helped him to his feet. 'Larry!'

'I don't like it.'

'You ...?'

'I don't like it at all.'

'What's the problem?'

'You sold out!'

'Larry, you don't understand.'

'I understand!'

'I've never had money.'

'You're a sell-out!'

'Larry!'

'You sold your soul!'

'Larry, please.'

'You sold *us*!'

'No -'

'Sold our happiness!'

'We'll be happier than before.'

'We?'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean, *we*?'

'You and me, of course.'

'Ha!'

'Us.'

'Ha!'

'Larry and Serge.'

'You're getting a new partner.'

'No ...'

'Liar!'

'Larry ...'

'Traitor!'

'Larry!'

'Brutus!'

'Larry!'

'Cassius.'

'I'm warning you, Larry ...'

'Judas Iscariot!'

'That's enough! Another peep out of you and you're -'

'Peep!'

'- going in your suitcase!'

'Peep!'

'I'm warning you.'

'Peep!'

'Last chance.'

'... Peep!'

'That's it!' Serge took Larry by the throat and raised him off his feet.

'I'm not afraid of you!' Larry managed to get out despite being throttled.

'You're going in the suitcase!'

'No!'

'Yes!'

'Not the suitcase!'

'Yes, the suitcase!'

'Not the suitcase!'

'Yes, the suitcase!'

'It's dark in there!'

'I don't care!'

'I'm afraid of the dark!'

'You should have thought about that before you started insulting me.'

'No -'

'In you go!'

'No, no!'

Serge stuffed him in the suitcase and slammed it shut.

'Hey!'

'Stay in there -'

'It's dark in here!'

'- until you learn to talk nicely to people.'

'Open up!'

'Shush.'

'Let me out!'

'Quiet.'

'Let me out of here!'

'Quiet!'

'Serge, I'm sorry.'

'I'm going to finish my dinner.'

'Serge, don't do this to me! Remember that show we did in Vlorë? That lady nearly died from laughing! And that man in Elbasan who said he'd never laughed so hard in all his life?'

'Quiet!'

'What about that time we almost got buried in the snow?'

'Shh!'

'And that place in Greece where everyone was dancing on the tables? Hey, what's happening?'

Serge had picked up the suitcase and was carrying it out of the room so he could finish his dinner in peace. 'Hey! Did you just throw me? Oh, my shoulder, I think my arm's broken! You'd better take a look at it, Serge. Serge! Help me! Help! Help, I'm suffocating! I think I'm dying! Serge! *Serge!*'

Serge returned to the greenroom and finished his dinner. He made his way upstairs to the modest room that had been provided for him, washed his face, got into his pyjamas, and got into bed.

That night he dreamed a banquet was being held in his honour. He was seated at the head of a long table laid with innumerable delicacies. There were at least a hundred guests, he reckoned. The servants who waited on him served him choice wine and succulent morsels of roast beef and roast chicken. He looked to his left, curious to know who was occupying such a prominent place, and to his surprise he saw Princess Sophie of Albania, smiling at him. *I must be Albania's foremost poet*, he thought. He looked to his right, expecting to see another head of state, and was confused when he saw an empty chair.

'He sends his apologies,' said the princess.

'Who?'

Serge turned towards the princess but found her chair empty. He looked along the length of the table and found all the chairs empty but for a guest who was seated at the opposite end of the table, too far away to be seen.

'Did you enjoy the dinner?' Serge called out into the darkness. The guest did not answer. 'Would you like some more wine?'

The guest climbed up onto the table and started walking towards him, treading on what remained of the food as he went.

'Can I help you?'

The treading became stomping as the guest came closer. Serge was afraid. As the guest came closer, Serge was able to make out his features – the faded, worn-out red shoes, the brown, threadbare coat, the lime-green bowtie with white polka dots on it, and the long, white wisps that remained on either side of his head.

'Larry!' His partner continued to stomp towards him. 'What are you doing here?'

The marionette moved its jaw up and down but no sound came out.

'Larry ... speak to me!'

Larry continued stomping until he came so close that Serge felt the need to defend himself. He picked up a knife that was lying on the table and threatened him with it. 'I don't want to hurt you, Larry.' But the marionette paid no heed. When he was almost upon him, Serge closed his eyes and struck out with the knife.

When he opened his eyes there was silence. Larry was lying prostrate on the table in front of him with a knife in his back. He looked up and found all the guests of the banquet had returned to their seats and were looking at him with admonishment.

Serge tried to explain what had happened but he found he had lost control of his lips, and he had literally lost his tongue. He tried to articulate the words he wanted to say but all he could do was move his jaw up and down. He then felt himself being lifted up into the air by strings attached to him, and set upon the table. He found his limbs started to move on their own, and, before he knew it, he was dancing, much to the amusement of the guests, who were laughing at him. He looked up to see who was controlling him and saw the face of the gentleman whose contract he had signed. He woke with a start.

The gentleman and his driver were waiting the next morning by a car parked outside the bar. Serge greeted them with a suitcase in each hand, one containing his belongings, the other containing Larry. The gentleman's driver threw the suitcases unceremoniously into the trunk. He opened a door for Serge, inviting him to get in. They were soon on their way to Elbasan, where Serge's new boss had arranged for Serge to perform his first show under the new contract. When they arrived at their destination, the driver removed two new suitcases from the trunk of the car. He placed them at Serge's feet.

'My suitcases ...'

'*These* are your suitcases,' said the driver.

'Er ...'

'Your *new* suitcases,' said the gentleman.

'My clothes ...'

'All your clothes are in here,' the gentleman said, pointing to one of the suitcases.

'Larry?'

'Don't worry about that for now. Let us find your room.'

A porter carried Serge's new suitcases up to his room. There were chocolates on the bed, an en suite with a bath, and a beautiful view over the city.

'I hope you'll be comfortable,' said the gentleman. 'I'll see you at 6:30pm in the greenroom. The show is at 7pm. Freshen yourself up and try on your new clothes!'

'Will you send up my other two suitcases?'

'Serge!' the gentleman clapped him on the shoulder. 'New life – new clothes!'

'Please don't throw my old suitcases away – they were a present from my mother.'

'We will keep them in the trunk, don't worry. See you at 6:30pm, yes?'

Serge waited uncomfortably in the greenroom when the time came. His new shoes hurt and he felt constricted in his new suit. The gentleman arrived carrying a brand-new marionette.

'I have a surprise for you!'

The royal-blue velvet coat with shiny brass hook-and-eye fasteners contrasted elegantly with the white ruffle collar and bottle-green knickerbockers it was wearing, which were offset by the buckled mahogany shoes. The head of jet-black hair and the neatly trimmed moustache made him look like the gentleman who was holding him.

'Meet Ivan!' The gentleman pulled a string to make the marionette raise its right hand.

'He's very handsome,' said Serge.

The gentleman raised its right hand again.

'I'll leave you two together,' the gentleman said as he handed the strings to Serge. 'The show starts in fifteen minutes.'

Serge stared at his new partner for quite some time without saying anything. 'You're very handsome,' he said eventually.

'Thank you,' replied Ivan.

'Very handsome.'

'Thank you indeed.'

Serge tried him out. 'You move very well.'

'Of course.'

'Yes. Do you know the story of the bear and the dervish?'

'Of course.'

'The three brothers and the three sisters?'

'Of course.'

'Yes, of course ... Larry liked telling that one.'

'Who's Larry?'

'Never mind. Are you ready?'

'Of course.'

* * *

'Please welcome Ivan and Serge!' The announcer drew back the curtain and Serge stepped into the spotlight. There was a warm round of applause. He felt more nervous than he had in a long time. He wiped his brow with a handkerchief, which made Ivan wave his hand from left to right, which immediately set the crowd laughing.

Ivan told the stories of the bear and the dervish, the three brothers and the three sisters, and the boy with no

name, as well as many other folk tales, much to the delight of the crowd, who threw numerous coins onto the stage.

Serge was collecting the last of the coins, well after everyone had left, when a lone audience member started clapping.

‘Hello?’ Serge looked out to see who it was but the auditorium was pitch-black.

The gentleman came into the light. ‘We must celebrate!’

‘Hello.’

‘Serge, you are a success! Everybody loves you! I’ll order wine and stuffed eggplants.’

‘Stuffed eggplants?’

‘I’ll reserve a table for us. Go and freshen yourself up and I’ll meet you at the restaurant.’

Serge felt more relaxed after dinner. His first show had gone better than expected. The two men agreed fame and fortune would soon follow, and they ordered a second bottle of wine. Serge later made his way up to his room, exhausted after everything that had happened to him in the last 24 hours. He found Ivan sitting in an armchair, waiting up for him.

‘You’re still up?’ said Serge.

‘Of course.’

‘Would you like a cup of tea?’

‘No thanks.’

‘No?’

‘I don’t drink tea.’

‘Oh. A round of cards?’

‘I don’t like cards.’

‘Oh ... What about a chat?’

‘I’m not in the mood to chat.’

‘Larry and I would always play a game of cards and have a chat after a show. We’d have a cup of tea together.’

'Would you mind putting me to bed?'

Serge helped Ivan into his suitcase and closed the lid. Then he sat himself in the armchair and thought. The room was so quiet. *So, this is the life of a wealthy performer – big crowds, fine food and fine wine, clothes, a private room with a view of the city, and ... loneliness.*

His eyes felt heavy and, before long, he was overcome by sleep. He awoke soon after – or so he thought – to a banging coming from a suitcase in his room.

'Hey! Let me out of here! Let me out!'

Serge got up and opened the suitcase. 'Larry!'

'You buried me alive!'

'I thought we'd left you in the car!'

'You could've killed me!'

'What are you doing here? Where's Ivan?'

'That imposter!'

'How did you get in here?'

'You left me for an upstart like him!'

'Larry, I'm sorry.'

'Thirty years together!'

'Larry ...'

'Thirty years!'

'Larry, I'm sorry.'

'Look at you, you're a puppet!'

'Now, don't start ...'

'You're a puppet, Serge!'

'I'm warning you ...'

'You're a puppet, look at you!'

Serge felt his arms and legs being taken up by strings and he presently found himself flailing in the air. 'What's going on?'

'You're a puppet!'

'What's happening to me? Help! Who's controlling me? Larry, help me!' Serge looked up to see who was

manipulating him. The gentleman, larger than life, smiled back at him. 'Put me down! Hey! Put me down, will you?' The gentleman made him do a traditional folk dance. 'Stop that! Put me down! Put me dow-da-da-da-da ...' He could no longer articulate the words he wanted to say, able only to move his jaw up and down.

Larry laughed heartily as Serge was made to dance, more and more frenetically until, one by one, the strings holding him began to snap. He awoke, panting and sweating, as the last of the strings snapped.

He got up and washed his face, then went over to the suitcase and opened it. Ivan lay quietly inside. He came down, bleary-eyed, to breakfast. A coffee made him feel slightly better. The car, the driver, and the gentleman were waiting for him outside.

'We're going to Xibrakë,' said the gentleman. 'Two shows there and after that a festival in Librazhd. Lots of people!'

They arrived in Xibrakë by mid-afternoon. Serge was tired, not so much from the trip but from listening to the businessman making plans for his future. The driver opened Serge's door and a porter was on standby to carry his suitcases up to his room.

'Show at 7pm, Serge. Full house tonight.'

'Wonderful,' Serge replied.

* * *

A hush came over the crowd when the spotlight shone on the stage. 'Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ivan and Serge!' The crowd started clapping, whistling and whooping, then the noise died down as they waited for the show to begin. When no-one appeared on the stage, the announcer tried again. 'Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Ivan and Serge!'

Again there was no sign of either Ivan or Serge. The announcer looked embarrassed and went behind the curtain to look for the pair. When he emerged again, alone, the audience starting booing.

The gentleman was soon upstairs knocking on Serge's door. No-one answered so he knocked again, louder. When there was still no answer, he tried the door, which he found unlocked. He stepped inside to see Ivan sitting upright in an open suitcase and Serge's new clothes laid out carefully on the bed, his shoes by the bedside table, on which a great number of coins had been left.

By the time he found the lock on the trunk of his car broken, Serge was well on his way back to Tirana, with Larry high on his shoulders.

